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Scholarship Created in Memory of Local Writer Mary Jane Coartney

Jan-15-2010

Friends and family of writer/artist Mary Jane Coartney want to honor her memory by supporting others just beginning their artistic careers.

The Eastern Illinois University Foundation has announced the establishment of the Mary Jane Coartney Memorial Creative Writing Scholarship. Recipients of this award will be full-time students (junior status) enrolled at Eastern. Preference will be given to students majoring in English, history, journalism or theatre arts.

The first award is expected to be distributed in Fall 2011.

Coartney, who died on Feb. 22, 2009, at the age of 95, shared much of what she saw and lived through poetry, paintings, a daily journal and a monthly family newsletter -- the Coartney Chronicle - which had a circulation of more than 100 in 18 states.

Also, for a decade, right up until her death, she wrote popular weekly columns for the Charleston (Ill.) Times-Courier/Mattoon Journal Gazette.

In her writings, she told stories of attending a one-room school, her family's first car (a 1917 Chevrolet touring car equipped with side curtains to keep out bad weather), helping her husband on their farm, and raising their five children in "pre-Band Aid" days. She also shared what she knew about education, technology and politics.

As a child, Coartney attended Greenwood School, the one-room schoolhouse which now sits on the EIU campus and serves as a museum. Although she graduated from Eastern Illinois State Teacher's College (which ultimately became EIU) in 1930 with a teaching certificate, she never taught school, opting instead to devoting her life to her husband and children.

She and her late husband, Wayne, married on Dec. 31, 1931, and set up housekeeping on a farm south of Ashmore, Ill. Although her husband died in the late 1970s, Mrs. Coartney continued to reside on "the home place" until the time of her passing.

Over the years, she developed close relationships with her neighbors and other members of the community. And upon her death, she left four children (one daughter is deceased), 17 grandchildren, 50 great-grandchildren and 10 great-great-grandchildren.

According to her family, Coartney liked the connections she had with people and with history. She repeated stories passed down by family members regarding their ancestors' arrival to Coles County, Ill., in 1825.

"We walk where so many other feet have walked before us and where others will follow," she once wrote. "I hope we leave stories worth remembering."

Those who wish to contribute to the Mary Jane Coartney Memorial Creative Writing Scholarship may do so by making checks payable to the EIU Foundation. Checks can be mailed to EIU Foundation, 600 Lincoln Ave., Charleston, Ill. 61920.